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ABSTRACT

A method was developed to encourage urban elementary school students to humanize their environments through artwork and stories. The 46 participants were students in grades 2 through 6 from an inner city neighborhood characterized by violence and urban crime. The children came to a neighborhood center once a week for an enrichment and tutoring program. They were asked to draw a picture of what their neighborhood block was like and another picture of what they would like their block to be. A week later the children were guided through telling an original story about their drawings. The children were certainly aware of violence in their environments. Their information fell into three main categories: (1) what the block looks like; (2) the activity of people on the block; and (3) how they would like the block to look. The voices of these children, expressed in artwork and recreated in story form, became part of a process that might produce energy for other experiences that are part of an enriching school day. Children's ideas about their environment expressed in this way can educate the educator and provide evidence that children are "meaningmakers" in their own worlds. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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ED 434 177

Humanizing an Inhumane Urban Environment: Children's Artwork and Stories

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Children's Voices

I do not like my neighborhood because bad things happen there all the time. Sometime last year four people got shot down the block from where I live. I don't really know why they were shot but it makes me scared. I hate the bad things that happen in New York. A lot of people are doing bad things and some kids have to suffer for it. Some of the kids on my block are moving away. I would like to move upstate and get out of the city. (Lisette, Grade 5)

This story is about my friend. It was about two or three in the morning. You could hear the yelling in my friend's house. There were a lot of doors slamming. I don't know why. Then I heard a gun shot. Then an hour later there were 3 or 6 police cars and two ambulances. When I came out I saw the gun near the steps and I told the police. That's all I could remember. Then my mother screamed at me to go up. (Luis, Grade 6)

I was looking out the window and I saw some men inside and some men standing outside a car. They were trying to get the boy. They thought the boy had money. The boy's mother was already inside the car. He called, "Mom!" There was a scary lady wearing spikes on her wrist in the car. I was afraid to go outside. (Roxanne, Grade 3)

This is a story about a boy who ran away

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> **two weeks ago. He is a bum. He doesn't have a home and friends because he is a bad boy. He carries all the stuff that he found on the street. He wants to go to school but he can't because he doesn't have a place to live. Sometimes he wants to come back home but he is afraid that his parents don't love him. (Elvis, Grade 6)**

> **I'm home alone by myself feeling scared. The cat knocked over the vase. I'm too scared to clean it up. I feel like someone is watching me. They are watching me from the window or maybe even from the other apartment. I'm sitting down wishing my mother would come home. I'm a little angry because she went out to begin with. I think she is going to to be home soon. I will feel better when my mother is here. (Tamika, Grade 6)**

Introduction

It is now well known that in the United States children's environments have become more violent, particularly the urban environments in which children live. As one eight year old, who saw his mother shot, expressed it, "I'm scared to go out; I never want to go out." (New York Newsday, Friday, October 29, 1993). We know that the kinds of life experiences which children experience as violent are numerous in their own homes, in their neighborhoods, even in their schools. We also know that children are becoming increasingly both the perpetrators and recipients of this violence.

> The country is facing a crisis of violence among young people unlike any before, criminologists say. Even as overall violent crime has leveled off since since 1990 and the number of teenagers has declined, arrests of people under 18 for violent crime rose 47 percent from 1988 to 1992, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The rise in violence among the young crosses

> racial, class and geographic boundaries (Wilkerson, May 16, 1994, p. 1).

Whether a child is the perpetrator of violence or the recipient of it, the child is victim. James E. Lacey, a Detroit, Michigan, Juvenile Judge says,

> The problem is of such magnitude. It's vast. It's mindboggling. You see the failure of the schools. You see the failure of the parents. You see the violence on the streets. You see the guns. You see the drugs. The children are being robbed of their childhood. They are afraid of going to school and getting shot. They're worried about day-to-day survival...They're worried about getting out alive at the end of the day. That should not be a consideration in childhood (p. A14).

The Honorable Norma Cantu, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in the United States, spoke recently on this campus underlining the increase in violence which we and our children are facing, an increase which she considers a moral crisis or a crisis of character. It might also be seen as a crisis of ecology, in The Bronx a crisis of urban ecology: a crisis of the relationship between children and their urban environment. Cantu cited:

- 12-17 year olds are five times more likely to be raped or robed than adults;

- in the last 9 years arrests of youths have increased dramatically;

- crimes in schools have increased dramatically; in fact, the risk of violence may be greater in some school buildings than on the street.

Cantu is not alone in presenting this kind of data about our

urban environments:

An April 6, 1995 Prime Time Live (ABC) reported that by high school 12% of students carry guns and that guns are easy for children to get and, in fact are often sold by children. The same program estimated that by 18 years of age, children have witnessed 200,000 acts of violence including 25,000 killings on TV. Violent, aggressive behavior has become increasingly prevalent among preschoolers. A kindergartner was found with a fully loaded semiautomatic gun in school; a nine year old wrote a letter to Santa saying, "I want a gun. The type is 22...and slugs."

A March 31, 1995, newscast reported that in 1992 50 black male teenagers were killed in Washington, D.C.; 1,000 were killed nationally. This same newscast reported that more and more black teens are being sent to private high schools for safety as much as opportunity. One mother responded, "Thank God he's away. I can sleep at night."

In 1994 NEW YORK NEWSDAY reported that 676 knives, 558 box cutters, 82 handguns, 49 chemicals and explosives, and 43 airguns were confiscated in New York schools. In addition 1,371 cases of felonious assault. All figures which Schools Chancellor Ramon Cortines indicated were accurate. In a list of violent schools based on homicide, assault, robbery, sex offenses, kidnapping and drug and weapons, Bronx elementary schools were listed, Bronx junior high and intermediate schools, Bronx high schools, and three Bronx Special Education facilities (July 7, 1994, pp. A4, 5, 26). A school is no longer a place where a child can go and expect

to be safe.

In late 1993 Metropolitan Life asked Louis Harris and Associates to survey teachers, students, and law enforcement officials across the country to determine their perceptions of violence in American schools. 1000 3-12th grade teachers, 1180 3-12th grade students, and 100 police department officials indicated the following:

- that while 77% of teachers feel very safe in school (22% feeling only somewhat safe; only 50% of the students feel very safe (40% feeling somewhat safe);

- that while 70% of teachers believed that violence in their schools has stayed at the same level (19% said that it increased), 44% of law enforcement officials believe that violence in their local public schools has increased;

- teachers reported that pushing, shoving, grabbing or slapping was the most common form of violence (28%); students reported stealing (38%), then verbal insults (34%), then pushing, shoving, grabbing or slapping (33%) as the most common forms;

- teachers reported that most of violence occurs in the school neighborhood (43%) then on the school grounds (32%); students reported that most violence occurs on the school grounds or is equally divided among the school building, school grounds, and school neighborhood;

- teachers and students agree that most violence in the school building occurs in the hallways or staircases (teachers 64%; students 55%);

- while most teachers (43%) believed that gang or group membership or peer group pressure was a minor factor in violence; most students (54%) believed it to be a major factor;

- while most teachers listed lack of parental supervision (71%), lack of family involvement in the school (66%) and exposure to violence in the mass media (55%) as the major factors contributing to violence in the schools; students listed lack of parental supervision (36%) and gang or group membership or peer group pressure (34%).

Late 1993 statistics for New York City, (New York Times, June 11, 1994) specifically indicated an increase in assaults, robberies, rapes, and other crimes for the eighth year in a row.

The reasons cited for such violence in our urban environments are many and, I suppose, not surprising:

- the pressure on families of a changed economy;
- more working mothers with children in the care of others or unsupervised;
- more divorce and single parent families which seems to assume poor care;
- more teenage mothers;
- increased drug use;
- the doubling of child abuse and domestic violence in the last decade;

- more guns on the street;
- a culture that glorifies brutish behavior, in video games, on TV, in movies;
- idleness and hopelessness;
- the biological fluctuations of hormones (New York Times, May 16, 1994).

Background

Every urban teacher knows that the children with whom they work have experienced and continue to experience what we used to refer to somewhat benignly as "stressful life experiences"; we now know that these stressful life experiences are likely to be violent ones.

Teachers know that children who experience violence are often overwhelmed but may appear to be valiantly attempting to cope in school. The violence in their lives is often not experienced singly, but in multiples; intensely, and with little or no support from any source. When children experience violence, in or out of school, teachers often do not know how to be helpful when they have had little or no training in how to help children cope, are consequently afraid that whatever they attempt to do might be "wrong" for the children, and may be afraid for their own safety as well. In addition, time and curriculum pressures, as well as administrative philosophy, often work against teachers who are willing, even knowledgeable. This lack of support which some teachers experience rests on the thinking, both in children's schools and in teacher training programs, that dealing with

children's feelings in any planned way is not the business of teachers. We disagree.

All children experience a wide variety of life experiences which are stressful, more and more of them violent. We realize here that we are bringing an adult perspective; for a young child, it may seem that all stressful life experiences are a violent interruption of their illusion of safety. Some of these stressful or violent experiences are lived through first hand, or directly. Others are lived through second hand, or indirectly, with children evesdropping on the conversations of adults or other children, or with children watching a movie, television show or newscast, or engaging in a video.

Stressful or violent life experiences can result from primarily internal factors such as learning disabilities; physical disabilities; physical appearance; trauma or disease; age-appropriate fears and wishes; mistaken, unhelpful, and self-defeating perceptions of themselves and/or others (McNamee & McNamee, 1981, pp. 182-183; McNamee, 1982, p. 5).

Stressful or violent life experiences can result, also, from primarily external factors and it is these factors which are likely to be the most violent and upon which we would like to focus today. External factors occur in the **family environment** (separations of many kinds, illness, discord, child neglect and abuse, birth or adoption of a new sibling, move to a new home and or community and many others). External factors also occur in the **immediate outside community** of neighbors and friends; from the school community of

teachers, administrators, and other school personnel as well as classmates and schoolmates (relationships, learning issues, extracurricular issues, experiences on transportation or related to neighborhoods travelled through on the way to and from school). External factors occur in the **larger community** such as a section of the city, the city itself, the state, or the country in which children live (natural crises, violence) and can occur in relation to world events, experienced by a child second hand, such as war, uprisings, natural crises, energy-related phenomena (pp. 184-185; p. 5)

All children do not react to a stressful life experience in the same way. Children's reactions are dependent on their sense of themselves as having the ability, power, and control necessary to avoid, minimize, or end a stressful life experience. Children's sense of themselves evolves from their past life experiences with events and other people (p. 185). In every classroom a teacher is confronted with not only a wide-ranging collection of past and present stressful life experiences, but with a wide range of coping abilities in the children as well. Children's varying abilities to cope come from differences in the neurological/biological/ psychological makeup which is in part their genetic inheritance and in part their environmental experience. The parts that people, including teachers, play in causing a stressful life experience, or in supporting a child's coping with it, is of great significance in every child's life.

Table 1: WHAT CAN BECOME A STRESSFUL/VIOLENT LIFE EXPERIENCE FOR A CHILD?

1. **Factors which come from inside the child**

- Characteristics a child is born with
- Trauma or disease
- Age-appropriate fears and wishes
- Mistaken, self-defeating view of self

2. **Factors which come from outside the child**

- From the family environment
  a. Separation
  b. Family discord
  c. Child abuse and neglect
  d. Birth or adoption of sibling
  e. Family move to new home

- From the immediate outside community
  a. Neighbors
  b. Friends

- From the school
  a. Teachers, administrators, other school workers
  b. School work
  c. Extra-curricular activities
  d. Classmates and Schoolmates
  e. Transportation to and from school
  f. Neighborhoods traveled through; neighborhood in which school is located

- From the larger community
  a. Section of town in which the child lives
  b. Town/city in which the child lives
  c. State in which the child lives
  d. Country in which the child lives

- From world events
  a. War
  b. Socio-political uprising
  c. Natural phenomena
  d. Starvation
  e. Energy-related phenomena

The Process

All of this is to set the stage. Professor DeChiara and I became interested in children's perceptions of and reactions to their environment, be it home, neighborhood, or school. We realized that as violence in children's lives increased, their stress increased, making it difficult for teachers to proceed with the academic work of school. We wanted to work out a method for teachers to implement with children during the school day, whenever there was a moment or two, utilizing particularly children's artwork and stories in an attempt to reduce their stress. We have done this and field tested it with both pre and inservice teachers in The Bronx. In the process we have discovered something of children perceptions of their urban environments, inhumane as they often are, and we have discovered something of their attempts to humanize their environments through their artwork and stories both realistically presented (as if reality could be stared at clearly and directly and any threat met head on) and fantastically presented (as if reality was entirely too scary to be met head on but had to be disguised through fantasy of what it is and how it might be dealt with). We would like to present some of what we have learned.

The children's voices which we are presenting was undertaken with 46 children between second and sixth grades who come to Lehman once a week for an enrichment and tutoring program at the Lehman Early Childhood and Elementary Education Department's TLC, Teaching Learning Center. The children worked in a one-to-one or two-to-one

relationship with undergraduate preservice teachers under the guidance of Professor DeChiara in an undergraduate Art Methods course. For the purpose of today's presentation the children were asked by their tutor to draw "What it is like on my block" on one half a piece of paper and then "What I would like my block to be like" on the second half of the paper.

The purpose of the children's artmaking was to elicit their thoughts and feelings, initially, through images rather than words, therefore, words were not of primary concern. Unlike the making of art in an art teaching situation, the learning of skills and the production of an aesthetic quality of product was not of primary concern. What was of primary concern was that the artmaking process provide the vehicle for children to describe feelings and thoughts about their urban environment through imagery. Materials used were kept to a minimum and placed where that children had easy and immediate access to them: paper, colored markers, and lead pencils. There was little sound in the room, total involvement for one hour.

One week later, children were then guided through telling an original story about their drawings. It has been recommended that "interviewing" about a drawing be separated in time from the actual image-making (Rubin, 1978, p 13). This kind of delay may enable children to tell more because they have had time to process their real experience with their artmaking and storytelling. Tutors asked children to "Tell me a story about your picture" asking specific questions as guides and writing down children's responses

as they went along. In asking children to tell a story about their artwork, we are requesting that they translate the iconic or visual mode of expression inherent in their drawings to the linguistic mode. Many children are accustomed to doing this kind of translation; others respond with a puzzled look or state that they "don't know". It is not, however, only a matter of practice. If children's art has not developed into "fully fledged representations", usually below four or five years of age, it may have no linguistic counterpart. By four or five, however, many children are excited to tell about their drawing (Dubowski, 1990, pp. 8-9). Sometimes telling the story through visual images is as far as a child needs to go at present regardless of age, for many reasons, not the least of which might be the emotional power of the memory evoked by the drawing. Important throughout this intervention was for tutors not to push the children beyond where they were able to go. Few questions were asked, questions were kept open-ended, tutors attempted not to influence children with the tutor's ideas and values. Tutors were asked not to guess, in the children's presence, at the meaning of abstractly drawn or even recognizable images.

The thematic materials, conveyed through these drawings and stories can help us to understand how children perceive their environment and their relation to it. As adults, we know that urban children's environments are becoming more and more violent, but how aware are young children of what is happening around them?

The Results

These Bronx children were certainly aware of the violence of their block and when given the opportunity to give voice to what they live with, they took it. Their information basically falls into three categories: what their block looks like, the activity of the people on their block, and how they would like their block to be different.

What Their Block Looks Like

Most of the children described buildings: tall buildings, close buildings, lots of buildings in all kinds of colors, buildings which "block the sun", fire escapes, parks with nothing in them, stores that don't help people. They described the dirt, the garbage, the smell, the spit in the floor, the graffiti, the curses on the walls, the broken bottles on the street, "crack bottles on the floor", "it's a junk yard", "a dump". They described the large quantity of cars, speeding cars, car crashes, car horns which honk a lot, the noise, the lack of grass and trees and flowers. They described the large numbers of people: people sitting and standing around on the street, homeless people, poor and out-of-work people "who cannot afford to go out of the city", bums, bad people, gangs. They even described dogs which eat people (pit bulls?) and spiders which sting.

Table 2: What Their Block Looks Like

Response	**Percent**
Tall Buildings, close buildings, lots of buildings in all kinds of colors, buildings which block the sun, fire escapes, parks with	72%

nothing in them, stores that don't help people	
Dirt, garbage, smell, spit, graffiti, curses on the walls, broken bottles on the street, crack bottles on the floor, junk yard, dump	74%
Cars, speeding cars, car crashes, car horns, noise, lack of grass, trees, flowers	45%
Large numbers of people: homeless people, poor and out-of-work people who cannot afford to go out of the city, bums, bad people, gangs	15%
Dogs which eat people, spiders which sting	4%

The Activity of the People on Their Block

They described violence over and over again: people afraid to come out of their apartments, of being afraid themselves. They described curses, yelling, "screaming a lot", loud music sometimes all night, sexy clothes, even people kissing, "funky and crazy" behavior, hanging out in front of the building, sitting around bored, writing on walls, smoking, talking about people behind their back, bossing people around, throwing wrappers in bushes, dumping garbage, throwing things from windows, people afraid to come out of their house, "hiding in the house", "you get killed if you go out". They described playing with matches and lots of fires, fires in apartments, burning cars, fireworks, "lots of 'boom' sounds". They described play fighting, real fighting, "little kids in kindergarten fighting", teenagers fighting, too", fighting because

"of drinking" or "about animals", hearing shots, seeing shootings and beatings. They described kids and adults taking knives out, "butcher knives", razor blades, cutting people in the face with razor blades. They describe generally hurting, killing...more specifically killing poor people, a man pushed off his building, people getting arrested, going to the hospital. They describe burglars, stealing money, store people "trying to cheat...doesn't give back the right change", violent neighbors. And they describe people using drugs, getting drunk, selling crack and dealing drugs in general, drug dealers hurting people, cops chasing drug dealers, cops yelling "Stop, Boy!". They described people killing birds and other animals.

Table 3: The Activity of the People on Their Block

Response	**Percent**
People afraid to come out of their apartments, being afraid themselves	12%
Curses, yelling, screaming a lot, loud music, sexy clothes, kissing, "funky and crazy behavior", hanging out in front of building, sitting around bored, writing on walls, smoking, talking about people behind their back, bossing people around, throwing wrappers in bushes, dumping garbage, throwing things from windows, people afraid to come out, hiding in the house, getting killed if you go out	60%
Playing with matches, lots of fires, fires in apartments, burning cars, fireworks, 'boom' sounds	20%
Play fighting, real fighting, kids in kindergarten fighting, teenagers	54%

fighting, fighting because of drinking, fighting about animals, hearing shots, seeing shootings and beatings	
Taking knives out, razor blades, butcher knives, cutting people in the face with razor blades	11%
Hurting, killing, killing poor people, man pushed off building, people getting arrested, going to the hospital	13%
Burglars, stealing money, store people trying to cheat, violent neighbors	10%
People using drugs, getting drunk, selling crack, dealing drugs, drug dealers hurting people, cops chasing drug dealers, cops yelling "Stop, Boy"	30%
People killing birds and other animals	4%

How They Would Like Their Block to be Different

By contrast, as they turned toward how they would like their block to be different, some expressed general yearnings for their block to be beautiful, nice, colorful, fine, cool, and more exciting. Others expressed yearnings for trees, beautiful trees, apple trees, tree houses, trees "for birds to fly on", and grass. They yearned for flowers, animals, butterflies, birds, and shops of many kinds (pet shops, toy stores, McDonalds, theaters, and shops within their own building. They yearned for private houses instead of apartment buildings, buildings with "designs on them" and lots of purple, more room, big yards, a place to play, swings, fewer cars, a pool. They yearned for kind people, lots of children

playing and having fun, no big boys, no fighting, no killing, people walking dogs, and police officers. They yearned for cleanliness, people who "don't throw garbage", "the writing on the buildings to stop", the block to be "more respectable" and "more quiet", for peacefulness, for people working, and people getting vaccinated.

Some turned to fantastical thinking, perhaps the thinking of children who know that reality will never be good enough: a "dream block", "a house like a palace", a "house in the sky like a castle...free food...the time being another century (in the past)" "everything made of chocolate bars and regular candy", a block where "people can fly", "trees can talk", "buildings can walk", "cars can fly", "a castle in the sky", "a dinosaur", a house that can talk", "two pineapple trees...two pineapples on the floor and a six foot pool...It's in Paris and there's summer all the time", "My house would take up the whole block", "a discovery zone with lots of places to climb and hide", a house facing south so the wind wouldn't hit me in the face when I walk to school in the morning", and balloons in the air so it could be "a happy block".

Figure 4: How They Would Like Their Block to Be Different

Response	**Percent**
Beautiful, nice, colorful, fine cool, more exciting	17%
Trees, apple trees, tree houses, trees for birds to fly on, grass	28%
Flowers, animals, butterflies, birds, shops	41%

Private houses, buildings with designs, new buildings, purple, more room, big yards, a place to play, swings, an amusement park, fewer cars, a pool	41%
Kind people, people who treat children right, lots of children playing and having fun, no big boys, no fighting, no killing, no drugs, people walking dogs, police officers	46%
Cleanliness, people who don't throw garbage, writing on buildings to stop, more respectable, more quiet	52%
Fantastical thinking	35%

Only 3 children (6%) did not want to change their block in any way. Some children, however, were able to describe positive aspects of their block intermingled with the negative; they were able to describe landscapes of promise, landscapes which offered them a place where their selfhood matters (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995). They described the importance of shops of all kinds (pet store, ice cream store, groceries, supermarkets, pizza and video stores, and the well-known Dunkin' Donuts, Carvelle). They described a "park with basketball and tennis courts, with grass...where you can run around"; birds, flowers, and trees, cleanliness, color, and "nice people, regular people", nice people, "neighbors with good manners". They described the importance of some of their neighbors: people working on buildings, fixing doors and windows, fixing cars; people looking out the window and calling to friends, a dentist who looks out his window and talks to the children, a pizza man making pizza, a man selling beef patties and records, the guard who watches the staircase, police officers; kids

playing basketball and rollerblading, kids playing Leggo and computer games, playing in the snow on the roof, waiting to go to the prom.

Conclusion

The voices of these urban children, created in artwork and recreated in story form, become part of a process that clarifies, hopefully soothes, and frees energy for other experiences that are part of the business of an enriching school day, and of an enriching after-school program. Their voices become part of the process of opening the door of the classroom or afterschool program to the child's life outside in their urban environment, humane or inhumane as it may be, allowing children to be whole persons in school programs bringing their emotional selves to join with their intellectual and physical selves in a social environment that says, "All that you experience belongs to you and, therefore, belongs here with you". Their voices become part of the process of educating the educator, educating us to what children experience in their environment and how they perceive their relationship to that environment. Most important, their voices gave evidence that children are meaningmakers within their own lifeworld.

In essence their voices are what this environmental conference has been about: that we have allowed our environment to erode to such an extent that urban children can find little safety in their neighborhoods, in this neighborhood, children close enough that they can walk to an afterschool program at this college. We have allowed our environment to erode to such an extent that young

children in our neighborhood have little illusion that they are safe. These are the children of the war zone. And they're right here. Perhaps we have had enough. Perhaps not. Collectively, sometime, we will all have to say "enough".

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